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# America's Descent to Depravity

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*The Protestant ethic once defined the American character. It was held to be responsible for the success of Capitalism in Northern Europe and America by sociologists, but the Protestant ethic and Capitalism are incompatible, and Capitalism ultimately caused the Protestant ethic to be abandoned.*

A new ethos emerged that the governing elite completely misunderstands. It is the ethos of the "big break," the "jackpot," the "next big idea." The slow and deliberate road to success is now anathema. Coming up with the next big commercial idea is the new model of the American dream. All that matters is the money. Given that attitude, few in America express moral concerns. Wealth is its own reward; it's even worth destroying ourselves for. And if we haven't done it yet, we surely soon will.

I suspect that most people would like to believe that societies, no matter how base their origins, become better over time. Unfortunately history belies this notion; societies have often grown worse over time. The United States of America is no exception. It was not benign at its origin and has now descended to a region of depravity seldom matched by even the worst nations of history.

Although it is impossible to find hard numbers to prove that morality in America has declined, anecdotal evidence is everywhere to be seen. Almost everyone can cite situations in which the welfare of people was sacrificed for the sake of public or private institutions, but it seems impossible to cite a single instance of a public or private institution's having been sacrificed for the sake of people. If morality has to do with how people are dealt with, one can legitimately ask where morality plays a role in what happens in America? The answer seems to be, "Nowhere!" So what has happened in America to account for the current epidemic of claims that morality in America has collapsed? Well the culture has changed drastically in the last half century, that's what.

Once upon a time in America, the American character was defined in terms of what was called the Protestant Ethic. The sociologist, Max Weber, attributed Capitalism's success to it. Unfortunately Max was lax; he got it wrong, completely wrong. Capitalism and the Protestant ethic are inconsistent with each other. Neither can have been responsible for the other.

The Protestant (or Puritan) ethic is based upon the notion that hard work and frugality are two important consequences of being one of Christianity's elect. If a person is hard working and frugal, s/he is considered to be one of the elect. Those beneficent attributes, it was believed, made Americans a more industrious people than people elsewhere (although Europe's Protestant societies were considered a close second while Southern Europe's Catholic peoples were considered slothful.) Some now claim that we are witnessing the

decline and fall of the Protestant ethic in Western societies. Since the Protestant ethic has a religious root, the decline is often attributed to a rise in secularism. But that case is considerably easier to make in Europe than in America where Protestant fundamentalism still has a huge following. So there must be some other explanation for the decline. Nevertheless, the increase in secularism has led many to claim that secularism has destroyed religious values along with the moral values religion teaches. There's another explanation.

In 17th Century Colonial America, the economy was agrarian. Hard work and frugality fit that economy perfectly. But America is no longer agrarian. The American economy today is defined as industrial capitalism. Agrarian economies rarely produce more than can be consumed, but industrial economies do every day. So in order to keep an industrial economy functioning, consumption must not only be continuous, it must continually increase.

I doubt that there is a reader who has not heard that 70% of the American economy results from consumption. But 70% of one is 0.7, of two, 1.4, of three, 2.1, etc. As the economy grows from one unit of GNP to two units, consumption must grow from 0.7 units to 1.4 units. But continually increasing consumption is not compatible with frugality. An industrial economy requires people to spend and spend and spend while frugality requires people to save and save and save. The American economy destroyed the Protestant ethic and the religious views upon which it was founded. Conspicuous consumption replaced hard work and thrift.

In his *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith claims that Capitalism benefits everyone since acting in one's own self-interest benefits others. Now we are being told that, "Saving more and cutting debt might sound like a good plan to deal with the recession. But if everyone does that, it'll only make matters worse. . . . what the economy needs most is for consumers to be spending more freely." The great recession has stood Adam Smith on his head, but no economist will admit it. "[A]n environment where everyone wants to save cannot be conducive to growth. Production needs to be sold and for that you need customers."

Saving is (presumable) good for individuals but bad for the economy which requires continuously increasing spending. If an economist had told that to me to my face, I would have told him that that clearly means that there is something fundamentally wrong with the nature of the economy, that it means that the economy does not exist to provide for the needs of people but that people exist only to fulfill the needs of the economy. Although it may not look like it, such an economy enslaves the people it claims to serve. So in effect, industrial capitalism has perpetuated slavery; it has re-enslaved those who were once emancipated.

When consumption replaced thrift in the American psyche, the rest of morality sank into depravity with it. The need to sell requires marketing which is nothing but a liars lair. After all, the entire enterprise is founded on Edward L. Bernays 1928 book, *Propaganda*. The American culture has been inundated by a tsunami of lies. Marketing has become the culture's predominant activity. No one can isolate her/himself from it. It's carried on by businesses, politicians, and the media. No one can be certain s/he's being told the truth by anyone. No moral code can survive in a culture of dishonesty, and none has!

Having subverted the Protestant ethic, the economy destroyed every ethic America has ever

promoted. It became a society without an ethos, a nociety with no humane purpose. Americans have become lambs sacrificable for the sake of machines. Then a new ethos emerged from the chaos, one that the governing elite completely misunderstands.

It is often claimed that Washington has lost touch with the Americans it governs, that it no longer understands its people or how its common culture operates. Washington and the nation's elite don't realize it but the culture no longer values right over wrong or hard work and frugality over sloth and profligacy. Americans today are looking for the "big break," the "jackpot," the "next big idea." The American Dream has now been reduced to "hitting it big!" The slow and deliberate road to success is anathema. Watch *American Idol*, *The X Factor*, and *America's Got Talent* and survey the Mongolian hoards that show up for auditions. These people, for the most part, have not worked hard at anything. Count the number of people who wager on the Lotto regularly. Such wagering requires no work at all. All these people want to do is hit it big. And who are our most extolled businessmen? Entrepreneurs! Entrepreneurs are, for the most part, one time flashes in the pan although there are notable exceptions. The trouble with entrepreneurship, however, is the high regard in which it is held. But the only value attached to it is the amounts of money entrepreneurs have made. We rarely hear anything about the nefarious ways in which they have made it. Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, hardly present images of people with sterling moral characters, but in an economy without moral scruples, no one cares; all that matters is the money. Given that attitude, why should anyone in this society express moral concerns? Few in America do. So while the American elite still talk about the need to produce a workforce suitable to the needs of industry, the people want none of it.

The elite often bemoan the American educational system's failure and have been trying to fix it unsuccessfully for several decades. But if one remembers that many of America's present, most successful entrepreneurs are college dropouts, how can the young be convinced that a college education is a worthwhile endeavor? As Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg have shown, learning to write software does not require a college degree. Neither does winning the Lotto or a place on *American Idol*. Being drafted by the NFL may require a stint in college, but it doesn't require a degree. All entrepreneurship requires is a new marketable idea.

Entertainment and sports, lotteries and game shows, consumer products that people have had no need for for billions of years are now the stuff of American culture. But they're not stuff, they're fluff; they cannot form the basis of a stable, prosperous, humane society. It is a culture governed by merely one attribute—wealth, ill gotten or not!

The human capacity for self-delusion is limitless. Americans have deluded themselves into believing that aggregate wealth, the sum total of wealth rather than how it is distributed, makes right. It matters not how it is gotten or what is done with it. Aggregate wealth is its own reward; it is even worth destroying ourselves for. And if we haven't yet, we surely soon will.

History describes many nations that have become depraved. None that has has ever reformed itself. No beautiful boy can be counted on to come forth to undo the catastrophe of the Midas touch. Money, after all, is not one of the things human beings need to survive, and if money isn't used to produce and distribute the things needed, human survival is impossible no matter how much aggregate wealth is accumulated.

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